

Editorial | A Revolution Museum Truce at Valley Forge

A modern-day Baron von Steuben may be needed to marshal disgruntled factions at Valley Forge.

Neighbors, park rangers and interest groups are in an uproar over the latest proposal to build an American Revolution museum - this time on private land within the park's congressionally designated boundary.

While all parties claim a common goal - improving visitors' experience by better telling the Revolution story - that shared value has been clouded in recent weeks by accusations and misinformation.

The Lower Providence Board of Supervisors has called a truce. Instead of voting tonight on the site proposal, it's hosting a public presentation and question-and-answer session.

It's a wise time-out.

Done well, a Revolutionary War museum offers a chance to bolster Valley Forge, a park shamefully neglected by the federal government since its takeover from Pennsylvania in 1976.

A museum also would complete the region's heritage tourism trail, complementing Independence Park, the National Constitution Center and Gettysburg.

But this new museum needs a sound business plan and a location tourists can find and use easily. It must respect Valley Forge's hallowed grounds and cooperate fully with the National Park Service.

So far, the museum's planners haven't adequately made the case for their proposed new site - 78 acres between the Schuylkill and Route 422, not far from St. Gabriel's Hall. They can change that tonight.

The center's advocates rightly focus on the overdue need for a thorough retelling of the Revolution in a world-class setting. They brag about hiring the renowned architectural firm Robert A.M. Stern, and their impressive group of scholarly advisers (although it's short on racial diversity). Fine.

But they needlessly caught park officials, environmentalists, neighbors and advocates off-guard with the growing scope of the project. The latest plan includes a three-story hotel, conference center, campground, and other amenities.

"Friends" of the park, in turn, have misrepresented basic museum services that are planned for the site: calling an ATM machine a full-service bank and describing day-care for workers' children as a stand-alone center.

There's spin all around.

Caught in the cross fire is the Lower Providence Board of Supervisors, which will dictate the all-important rules to develop the land, now owned by the suddenly eager-to-sell Archdiocese of Philadelphia. The board must set tight restrictions to protect this sensitive land.

Many of the tensions date to the unfortunate dissolution last winter of a promising partnership between the museum group and National Park Service. The museum was then proposed in a much better place - near the park Welcome Center, a more central location with heavy visitor traffic, existing roads and utilities.

Frustrated by conditions set by the government, the American Revolution Center walked away from that arrangement and found the new site. But its remoteness raises questions about ease of access and likelihood of visitation. Can the museum succeed with a business model based on the previous, more accessible site?

The Park Service also worries about protecting possible archaeological treasures buried on the new site, where Gen. Washington's commissary was located. Congress has never financed an exploration. The museum says it will explore before construction and display any artifacts found. That's good.

The planners also must be required to maximize open space to protect the watershed and wildlife and provide recreation - a key concern to park visitors in this congested area.

A Revolutionary War museum - so desperately needed at Valley Forge - seems like a long shot now. But so was the American victory over the British.

Editorial |

The American Revolution Center will present its plans at 8:30 tonight at the Lower Providence Board of Supervisors meeting, 100 Parklane Dr., Eagleville.

For information about the meeting, call the township at 610-539-8020. The plans are available online at www.americanrevolutioncenter.org.